DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 195 341 PS 011 851

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TITLE Variables and Methodological Considerations Associated with Children's Sex Role Preferences.
PUB DATE [80]
NOTE 21p.: Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (88th, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, September 1-5, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cognitive Development: *Employed Parents: Females: Intelligence Differences: Males: *Measures (Individuals): Methods: *Mothers: *Preschool Children: Sex Bias: Sex Differences: *Sex Role: Sex Stereotypes
IDENTIFIERS *It Scale for Children

ABSTRACT

Several key variables in the development and assessment of young children's sex role preference are examined in this study. A sample of 257 pre-kindergarten children (mean age, 59 months) and their mothers participated in this study. After obtaining information on each child's age, IQ, and his/her mother's employment status the It Scale for Children (ITSC) was administered to assess each child's sex role preferences. The ITSC is a projective test consisting of 36 cards depicting stereotypic feminine and masculine objects and activities. Children are asked to choose preferred picture cards for "It," a stick figure assumed to be neuter. However, "It" seems to be perceived as a male by many children. Therefore, in addition to the standard projective procedure, three additional procedures were used: The It figure was shown and the child was asked to choose items for her/himself: an All-white stimulus card was shown and projective instructions were administered: and an All-white card was shown and the child was asked to choose items for her/himself. It was found that the ITSC gave an inadequate and biased assessment of sex role preferences and that age and IQ were related to sterotypic sex role preferences. In addition, no differences were found between children of employed and children of nonemployed mothers. It was suggested that the use of an All-white card with projective instructions may well provide a more accurate projective measure of sex role preferences.

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Variables and Methodological Considerations Associated with Children's Sex Role Preferences

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PS011851

Running head: Variables and Methodological

Paper presented at the Meeting of the American Psychological Association, Montreal, September, 1980.

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Abstract

A sample of 257 pre-kindergarten children (mean age, 59 months) and their mothers participated in this study. To assess sex role preferences, the It Scale for Children (ITSC) was administered to some children in its standard form and to others in one of three modified forms. It was found that the ITSC gave an inadequate and biased assessment of sex role preference. By modifying it, a more improved instrument was developed. This study also found that intelligence and chronological age were related to stereotypic sex role preferences. In addition, no differences were found between children of employed and children of nonemployed mothers.

Variables and Methodological Considerations Associated with Children's Sex Role Preferences

Currently, the desirability of stereotypic feminine and masculine sex role preferences is being questioned. As the roles of women and men become less dichotomous, sex differences in the way children are reared will diminish (Hoffman, 1977). Therefore, it seems appropriate to investigate some of the influences that affect the acquisition of sex role preferences in young children and to assess factors affecting the measurement of such preferences. Sex role preference is defined as an individual's preference for roles, activities, and objects appropriate for her/his own sex as prescribed by the culture.

This present study examines several key variables in the development and assessment of sex role preference. The developmental variables are employment status of mothers and cognitive development of children. The assessment variables are the type of stimuli (i.e., stimulus cards) and the instructions (i.e., projective or nonprojective) used.

Employment Status of Mothers

In a review of research findings, Hoffman (1974) reported that daughters of nonemployed mothers were more traditional in their perceptions of sex roles than were daughters of employed mothers and that the fathers were also more likely to participate in child care and household tasks if the mothers were employed. Apparently, different roles of mothers and fathers, influenced

by the employment status of the mothers, can affect their children's sex role perceptions.

Perloff (1977) reported that preschool age children of employed women had significantly less stereotyped sex role perceptions than children of nonemployed women. Others have found that children of nonemployed mothers tended to categorize items in a sex role stereotyped manner more often than did children of employed mothers (Hartley and Klein, 1959). In contrast to these findings, however, Hartley and Hardesty (1964) found that sex-typing was not affected by maternal employment status.

There is a paucity of research on employed mothers and their effects on young children's sex roles. In one study of kindergarten girls, Miller (1975) found that daughters of nonemployed mothers had a more traditional conception of sex roles; they described mothers as homemakers and fathers as breadwinners.

Most research has examined the relationship between maternal employment status of school age children's sex typing or sex role perceptions. However, the present research studies the sex role preferences of a large sample of younger (prekindergarten) children. It is predicted that:

Children of employed mothers will have less stereotypic sex role preferences than will children of nonemployed mothers.

Cognitive Development

Kohlberg (1966; 1969) claimed that the concept of sex role changes

with age as a result of cognitive development. He also claimed that acquiring conservation of sex, in addition to conservation of other concepts, is a part of cognitive growth and restructuring.

Research concerning the effects of cognitive development on sex role development has supported Kohlberg's theory (Masters & Wilkinson, 1976; Thompson, 1975; Williams & Bennett, 1975). There is also evidence that, up until at least the age of 9, sex role preference becomes increasingly more stereotyped (Falkenberg, Rahn, & Waern, 1971; Marantz & Mansfield, 1977). Since the subjects in the present research were under this age and therefore still developing their cognition of sex role, it is predicted that: Older girls will have more feminine preferences than younger girls, and older boys will have more masculine preferences than younger boys.

Cognitive development is determined by level of intellectual functioning as well as by age. Many researchers have reported a relationship between intelligence and stereotypic sex role preferences in both girls and boys (Kohlberg & Ziegler, 1967; Lefkowitz, 1962; Sontag, Baker & Nelson, 1958). However, Epstein & Leverant, (1963) have not been as clearly supportive of this claim. In order to determine if I.Q. is a factor in the present research, it is predicted that: Higher I.Q. will be correlated with more feminine scores in girls and more masculine scores in boys.

Problems in Measurement

Brown's (1956) It Scale for Children (ITSC) is a popular instrument for

measuring sex role preferences in young children. It is a projective test consisting of 36 cards which depict stereotypic feminine and masculine items from which the child must make preferred choices for "It," a stick figure claimed to be neuter.

Kohlberg (Note 1) has claimed that the It figure is perceived as a masculine figure and not as a neuter figure as Brown assumed. Other studies (Schell and Silber, 1968; Sher and Lansky, 1968) have also revealed that more subjects replied that the It figure was a boy, rather than a girl.

Researchers have tried to check for this male bias in several ways. For example, some have modified the instructions and asked children to make choices for themselves, rather than for It, or they referred to It as either a "little girl" or "little boy" (Hartup & Zook, 1966; Schell and Silber, 1968). Some researchers have concealed It in an envelope (Lansky and McKay, 1963; Sher and Lansky, 1968; Thompson and McCandless, 1970). In addition, other researchers have modified the It card by using a blank card (Fling & Manosevitz, 1972) or by picturing only the eyes, nose, and mouth of the It figure (Dill, Bradford, Prudent, Semaj & Harper, 1975).

The results obtained by using these different methods generally revealed that: 1) there was a male bias in the It card; 2) girls obtained more feminine scores when a modified It card or envelope was used; 3) and children made more same-sex choices when choosing for themselves, rather than for It. However, contradictory results have also been obtained

(Lansky and McKay, 1963).

Most research has used repeated measures designs to test for a bias in the ITSC. However, the present research uses varied methodological procedures in four distinct groups. This technique is preferable to those which use multiple administrations because the effects of the individual treatments can be assessed without being affected by the effects of prior administrations. Therefore, this study was necessary in order to help resolve the issue of the male bias in the It figure. It is predicted that: Girls and boys shown the All-white stimulus card will obtain less male-biased scores than girls and boys shown the It stimulus card.

Method

Subjects. A sample of 257 pre-kindergarten children (126 females and 131 males) and their mothers served as subjects in this study. The mean age for females was 58.74 months, with a range of 51 to 73 months. The mean age for males was 59.72 months, with a range of 52 to 72 months.

The children in this research were from the school district of a moderate-sized town in Pennsylvania and were required to be screened for admittance to kindergarten. Upon arrival for their screening appointments, mothers and children were asked to participate in this study. Only three mothers did not wish to particpate, and two foreign children were not included because they did not speak English well.

Instruments. The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) Form A (Dunn, 1955) was used to measure the children's I.Q. In order to assess sex role

preferences, Brown's (1956) It Scale for Children (ITSC) was administered. Overall scores on the ITSC can range from 0, the most feminine score, to 84, the most masculine score.

In addition to the standard procedure for administering the ITSC, three additional procedures were used: The It card was shown and the child was asked to choose items for her/himself; an All-white card (same size as It card) was shown and standard projective instructions were administered; and an All-white card was shown and the child was asked to choose items for her/himself.

Procedure. While the mother completed a brief questionnaire (including information on employment history), the Experimenter took the child to another room and administered the PPVT and then administered one of the ITSC Procedures. One particular procedure was chosen randomly for each child. To insure an approximately equal distribution of female and male children across procedures, females and males were selected separately.

After administering the ITSC, the Experimenter asked each child to name the sex of the It card or All-white card. Total testing time was approximately 20 minutes.

Results

In order to determine if there were differences in sex role preferences associated with maternal status, stimulus card, instructions, or sex of child, a 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 unweighted means Analysis of Variance for unequal cell frequencies was performed on the children's ITSC scores.

No main effect or interactions involving maternal employment status were significant at the .05 level. However, the other three main effects were statistically significant: The It figure elicited significantly higher more masculine scores from children than did the All-white stimulus card ($p < .05$); children who were given the standard projective instructions obtained significantly higher more masculine sex role preferences scores than children who were asked to choose items for themselves ($p < .05$); and females obtained significantly more feminine scores than males, and males obtained significantly more masculine scores than females ($p < .001$).

There was a significant ($p < .05$) two-way interaction between stimulus card and instructions (Figure 1). Children who were shown the It stimulus card and given standard projective instructions obtained more masculine scores than children who were asked to choose items for themselves, whereas children who were shown the All-white stimulus card and given standard projective instructions did not obtain different mean scores from children who were asked to choose items for themselves.

In addition, there was a significant ($p < .001$) two-way interaction between instructions and sex of child (Figure 2). Females scored more feminine, and males scored more masculine when asked to make choices for themselves than did children who were asked to make choices for the It or the All-white card (projective instructions); and this trend was greater for females than it was for males.

All correlations were calculated by using r to z transformations. A

Stimulus Card and Instruction Interaction

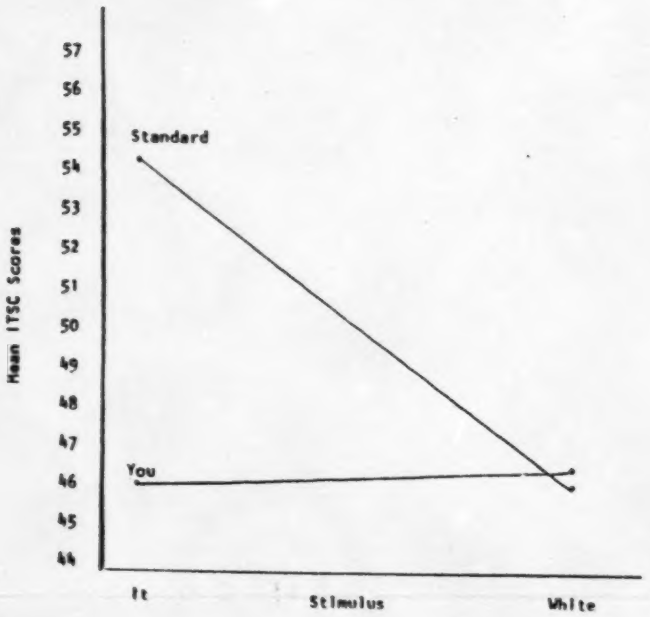

Figure 1

Instruction and Sex of Subject Interaction

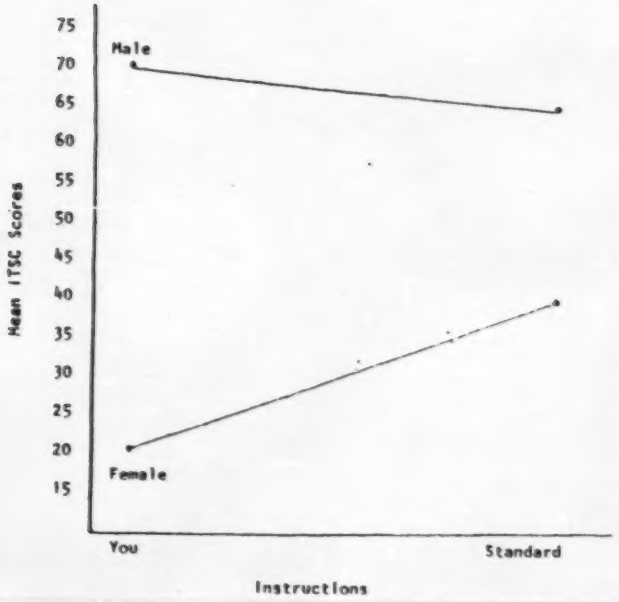

Figure 2

significant positive correlation (indicating that older children scored more masculine) was found between age and ITSC scores for males ($p < .05$; $r = .236$) but not for females.

In addition, significant correlations were found between I.Q. scores and sex role preferences scores for both males ($p < .01$; $r = .279$) and females ($p < .05$; $r = -.239$) (Low scores on the ITSC represent feminine sex role preferences).

Reported Sex of Stimulus Cards

Males reported that the It figure was a boy (95.16%) more often than they reported that It was a girl (3.22%). Females also reported that the It figure was a boy (63.44%) more often than they reported It was a girl 34.92%). However, females and males responded differently when shown the All-white card. Females reported that the All-white card was a girl more often (79.19%) than they reported that it was a boy (23.81%). On the other hand, boys reported that the All-white card was a boy (78.86%) more often than they reported that it was a girl (20.29%).

Discussion

Maternal Employment Status and Sex Role Preference

There are no meaningful differences between the sex role preferences of preschool children of employed versus nonemployed mothers. This is in striking contrast to previous work which generally found such differences among school age children when sex typing or sex role perceptions were examined. Perhaps the children in the current study were too young to have

been affected by maternal employment status. In addition, employed mothers, rather than their husbands, are likely to be the primary caretakers of young children and the home even if mothers are employed. So young children may only be aware of the homemaker role that the employed mother is performing, and not her occupational role. As a result, differences may not be shown because these mothers are modeling behaviors similar to those of the nonemployed mothers. In addition, since sex role preference is a different variable, it is possible that these findings were due to this factor, rather than to age.

Cognitive Development

Between the ages of 4-6, masculine sex role preference is stronger in older boys while there are no such age differences in feminine sex role preference evidenced among girls. For males, this supports Kohlberg's theory that as cognitive abilities develop with age, so does the development of sex roles. The results of the present research are consistent with the findings of other investigators for males but not for females (Masters and Wilkinson, 1976; Williams and Bennett, 1975). The current findings suggest that there may be earlier and greater pressure on boys to be masculine than there is on girls to be feminine.

Intelligence was correlated with more feminine scores in girls and more masculine scores in boys. These results are consistent with those of other investigators (Kohlberg and Zigler, 1967; Lefkowitz, 1962; Sontag, Baker and Nelson, 1978). The evidence suggests that girls and boys with higher intelligence are more aware of those items that are "appropriate" for each

sex and this may result in early mastery of society's sex-role stereotypes.

Male Bias in the IT Card

Both girls and boys seem to perceive the It figure as a boy. These findings are consistent with the research of previous investigators (Brown, 1956; Fling and Manosevitz, 1977; Kohlberg and Zigler, 1967; Schell and Silber, 1968; Sher and Lansky, 1968) who reported that both females and males tended to see It as a boy. Other studies (Endsly, 1967; Lansky and McKay, 1963) have not found this bias, and no explanation for this inconsistency is apparent.

In light of the findings of the present study, the It Scale for Children does not appear to be a projective measure as Brown (1956) intended. Since many children perceive the It figure as a male, they may be making masculine choices for the male It figure pictured on the stimulus card. Therefore, the ITSC may be measuring knowledge of the male sex role as Sher and Lansky (1968) suggested, rather than sex role preference. The All-white card, on the other hand, does not have this inherent gender bias. Both females and males tended to perceive this as their own sex.

The significant interaction between stimulus card and instructions suggests that the standard version of the ITSC is eliciting male responses from children of both sexes because children seem to perceive It as a male, as noted earlier. This confirms the impression already gained that the ITSC is measuring knowledge of sex roles, rather than sex role preference and cannot be considered a truly projective measure of sex role preference.

The significant interaction between instructions and sex of child is

consistent with the findings of Sher and Lansky (1968). Society is more flexible with females and more rigid with males concerning sex roles, and males are less likely and females are more likely to make cross-sex preferences. Therefore, when given projective instructions females make more masculine responses possibly because these responses are socially acceptable and also because the masculine role is the more valued role in our society. However, when asked to make choices for themselves, females knew which responses were the correct ones to make for their sex and chose these. Males, on the other hand, adhered more to the masculine responses no matter which instructions they were given.

The results of this study suggest that the All-white card with projective instructions might be a less biased instrument for measuring sex-role preference in both girls and boys. By using this altered instrument, one could, therefore, determine if children prefer same-sex or cross-sex choices because children would not be responding to a gender biased stimulus card.

Reference Note

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